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SUBJECT: THE COTTON HARVEST IN SOUTHERN TAJIKISTAN

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¶1. (U) Summary: A late October visit to Tajikistan's southern Khatlon province provided a more complete picture of labor conditions in the cotton industry. As in the northern Sughd province, there was evidence of forced and child labor (reftel A). Reliance on such labor is a holdover from the Soviet era, but these practices continue in part because of endemic problems in the country's cotton industry. While the international and local media have reported on the situation, the Tajik public does not appear to be outraged. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) EmbOffs met with Saidrahmon Nazriev, a reporter for the news organization Asia Plus, Dilbar Khalilova, head of the NGO Fidokor, and two university students (names withheld) in Kurgonteppa to discuss this year's cotton harvest. EmbOffs also spoke to Jura Soliev, a cotton farmer in Yovon. All of our interlocutors said practices in Khatlon were similar to those in Sughd. Farmers in the south relied on university students who were compelled against their will to participate in the cotton campaign; high school students in grades 9 to 11 also participated in the cotton harvest after school; and working conditions are extremely poor.

PREVALENCE OF FORCED LABOR UNEVEN

¶3. (SBU) Authorities cancelled classes at both universities in Kurgonteppa during the cotton harvest season to facilitate student participation. According to a second year English language student, on 22 September, the university organized buses that took him and 300 of his classmates to pick cotton. University instructors supervised the students in the fields, and forced some students to sign declarations that they were participating voluntarily. Conditions for the students were extremely poor; they worked from 8 a.m. to sundown, received 25 dirams (about 7 cents) for each kilogram of cotton picked, and had to reimburse the farmers for food and lodging. They lived in communal houses and did not have clean drinking water. Each day, about five students simply left the fields, including our interlocutor. He did not know if university officials would punish him, but he was also concerned that he would get into trouble for speaking to EmbOffs.

¶4. (SBU) A third year law student at another university said that about 30 percent of his classmates participated in the cotton harvest, primarily first and second year students. University officials were more lax with students in upper levels who had "put in their time"; he and most of his classmates were staying at home, waiting for classes to resume in November. Students did not necessarily mind missing school because they did not think they were getting a good education. Many attended university to postpone military service, and many others bribed professors to get good grades.

¶5. (SBU) Khalilova, the NGO head, telephoned colleagues who worked at universities in Kulyob. They reported their institutions had cancelled some classes for second and third year students. Khalilova asked if the World Bank helped finance the university

system; she was concerned whether universities that facilitate forced labor of students received international assistance. Khalilova and our student interlocutors said that some secondary school students - grades 9 through 11 - had to help in the cotton fields after classes.

NEWSFLASH: HARD WORK, LOW WAGES

¶16. (SBU) Newspapers throughout Tajikistan, particularly in Sughd, have reported extensively on labor issues and the cotton harvest. In mid-November, at least 5 major newspapers published articles QIn mid-November, at least 5 major newspapers published articles describing poor working conditions and contradicting claims by government officials that students participated in the harvest voluntarily. However Nazriev, the Asia Plus reporter, said he was very cautious about what he chose to put into print. He lacked finances to investigate the issue completely; if he omitted a fact, or misreported something, he could face severe legal consequences.

¶17. (U) The international media has reported on the subject. A recent New York Times article mentioned the mobilization of students. A U.S. Government-sponsored English Language Fellow in Khujand who visited his students in the cotton fields published his observations online on Ferghana.ru.

IT'S HARD TO FIND GOOD HELP THESE DAYS

¶18. (SBU) Soliev, the cotton farmer, explained that he could not find enough people willing to work his fields. He could not pay workers adequately because the government set the purchase price for raw cotton at a below-market level. He could not afford to mechanize his farm. He could not count on a ready supply of cheap labor because so many Tajiks had left the country for higher paying work

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in Russia or elsewhere. Instead, he resorted to asking local officials to send in students. The students were generally not very efficient; they didn't take their work seriously.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: In Sughd and Khatlon, it appears that local authorities - primarily the heads of local governments, in cooperation with school and university directors - are directly responsible for compelling, facilitating, or tolerating forced labor and child labor in the cotton sector. While national-level authorities officially have outlawed such practices, they have not ensured that local authorities follow the law. EmbOffs presented the information they gathered - including Tajik newspaper articles - to the Head of Tajikistan's anti-trafficking commission, Ramazon Rakhimov, who promised to investigate the situation further. We do not know whether he has the will - or ability - to compel change.

¶10. (SBU) Comment continued: Media attention has not generated a public outcry. Most adults in Tajikistan were mobilized for cotton picking during the Soviet period, and many still view labor practices in the cotton industry as an economic necessity or simply a tradition. While the problems of forced labor and child labor in the cotton harvest in Tajikistan may not be as severe as those in other Central Asian countries (reftel B), the problems persist, and addressing them would require Tajikistan to wean itself off the Soviet-era practices of mobilizing students; reform the agricultural sector; and enforce labor laws. Mobilizing students and closing universities during the cotton season hastens the deterioration of the educational system in Tajikistan as well. End comment.

JACOBSON